

Psychology of Removal: An Artist's Perspective
A Senior Honors Thesis

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Introduction: An Understanding of Origins

My story begins as a migrant. In my formative years I followed the dictate of my father, moving place to place as he saw fit for our wellbeing and happiness. Neither subject [our wellbeing nor happiness] was a true concern at the time as my father's one true love was the pursuit of adventure, which he found on the back of a horse chasing gold. The lack of stability from this lifestyle posed many challenges for my father's children. Difficulties in making friends, making a home, and keeping bitterness at bay were the most aggravating problems brought on by our nomadic way of life, and were the common costs we paid. All of us sought different ways to cope with our existence and way of life. I turned to art. As a very young child I would melt wax in the hot desert sun, and draw pictures in the soft skin it formed at dusk's cool approach. I would carry my father's old camera with me to capture every person, cactus, or cloud that I found interesting, and then scrape into the emulsion surface of the print to reveal the pure white paper that I was sure wanted its time to shine. Finally, settled at the age of seventeen, and still dealing with the repercussions of the past, particularly the inability and lack of interest in fitting in with my peers, I decided to complete my final year of secondary education in a university setting. There I discovered painting. I had never painted until I entered the university setting, and began to play with the removal of paint and painting materials. Slowly, I began to realize the therapeutic implications of what my process meant.

Introduction: About the Concept

The evolution of ideas is a part of life, a part of the process of learning, a part of open-mindedness, and a part of the research that I have conducted in my final year at OSU. This project began as a way to open the lines of communication both inter and intra-personally. My theories and processes of art making were conceived of as a way to pictorially represent the dictation of an individual's story. My original hope and a goal, that I plan to pursue through further education, is to work with troubled youth through this removal process of painting that has become an obsession in my life. It is my thought that like journaling, telling your story through pictures and images is an introspective and peaceful way to sort out your thoughts and emotions on any subject. Unlike journaling, painting can be a safer and more private way of doing this. Just as our world is filled with diverse languages, each individual has their own pictorial bank of images that mean very different and very personal things to each individual. Only the author of a painting can truly know all that it means, words are understood by far more and the author can often feel exposed to the point of continuing to keep much inside. A painting layered to the point that many of its contents are abstracted so that only its creator can recognize the meaning, is even safer and more personal than journaling. This concept of pictorial journaling and layering that enables a person to encode their own language to the point where it can be only un-coded if the meaning is then explained to the audience is a safety net in its own right, and then add the process of removal. What the process of removal adds to this already very full concept is that it allows the painter to symbolically travel into the past and sort out or remove certain aspects totally.

The ability to travel backwards into our own past and analyze what we find is something that psychologists have been trying to accomplish with their patients through many methods since Freud and before. It is my belief that this 'therapeutic' method of painting would be especially helpful in working with children, people facing language barriers, troubled youth, or introverts of any age. Unfortunately, due to IRB regulations, I have been unable to work out my theories in practice. However, through gaining the trust of individuals, to the point where they are comfortable with me telling their story, I am able to continue with a form of my original idea. In this way my subjects are not being helped in the way I would like, the therapy is not their own, but in a way has become mine. Through my efforts to give a voice to the voiceless, I have given an ear to the unheard, and it has taught me the importance of listening.



Section 1: On Gangs

As I began the telling of these stories I was very interested in the minds of the criminal adolescent,

especially those involved in gang activity. Always one to use what I know as a starting place, I chose to research Hispanic gangs, and the stories of those I know are personally involved. For these children and young adults I found that the sad narrative starts with the solicitation of "La Mara's" supposed family structure, a part of life many of these children are lacking at home. Once the child has become a target of the recruitment of the gang he or she may become willingly or unwillingly tattooed or branded with the highly visible and individualized markings of the given gang. This often happens to children as young as eight or nine years of age, and the proceeding effects are a heartbreaking and tragic occurrence in many of the cases of my acquaintances.

Upon the discovery of the markings on the bodies of the young new recruits, the authorities are prompt to kick them out of school so as not to spread the plague of "la raza mala." Once education is no longer possible, these young people have a hard time finding suitable employment due to age, lack of education, and affiliation with undesirables. Finally these young people are marked as targets for opposing gangs.

Having spent a great deal of my formative years in various spots along the US border with Mexico, I got to know, first hand, many of the afflicted and influenced, therefore I felt more at ease with sharing their unfortunate stories with the viewer. These are the stories of my compadres. My process in creating these pictorial narratives is the building up of subsequent layers of images that work together to tell the story of an individual. Starting at the beginning of the person's story and working towards present time, layer by layer, a

complete rehashing of events forming the circle of the individual's life is told. At the completion of the formation of pictorial layers, the painting is worked back into by removing parts of the layers representing the present and working backwards toward the beginning. In addition to working back towards the start of the story, the gang series is most easily identified by the representations of gang tattoos on the surface of the painting. Much of my research time was spent working through the meanings of different gang tattoos, and studying the tattoos that covered the skin of my subjects. I took this and their way of telling their own story, and turned it into the most literal part of any of my work thus far. In this way the retrospective of the person's life is told by re-examining parts of the story that may have led to an undesirable outcome, or just the opposite, to an outcome that was better than that which was hoped for.



Section 2: Walls Can Talk

The second "body" of paintings that I did in response to the idea that the removal process can in some way be therapeutic, was paintings based on the idea that a wall-like surface can tell a story just as easily as a picture. Walls and buildings with all their dents, dings, holes, and scars often give us a close account of those who live within their parameters. These paintings are built up out of sturdy panels and classic building materials. They tell the narratives of my family. These paintings start at the beginning of 1902, to the first automobile driving through a Western town, and these are just the beginning. Walls, over time, build up layers out of our lives. They see things, they hear things, and they contain fragments of our selves. In this way, walls tell one of the most complete stories, one of the truest stories we will ever hear. These paintings are started with only loosely symbolic images along with the colors and textures that are described to me by the original storyteller. The surfaces of these paintings are built up with both traditional building materials, as well as traditional painting materials. Layers are built up and parts are removed. The figurative and symbolic scarring of the 'wall' acts as the narrative portion of these paintings. A wall is just a wall; it is the scars on the wall that allow it to speak. When these works are finished they have the look of forgotten or abused structure, a structure that is indefinable, but that takes on a new meaning in light of its narrative contents. These paintings can take on a few different forms when finished. Sometimes the final work actually looks like a decrepit piece of structure, with cement crumbling away from its foundation and paint fading from exposure. Other times there is a little different

outcome to the paintings. In the American Southwest as well as in Northern Mexico wall murals are common in rich colors, even on buildings that have seen better days. A couple of my 'wall' paintings reflect this, in that they follow the same beginning form as the previously discussed paintings, but they are finished with an image. This image is usually slightly washed away. However, it still shows its rich color of better years.



Section 3: On Dreams

This third thought is the one that leads into the new direction that my work has taken, which is not to exclude my previous body of work, but to explore my process in greater depth, and by expanding it's implications as a psychological tool.

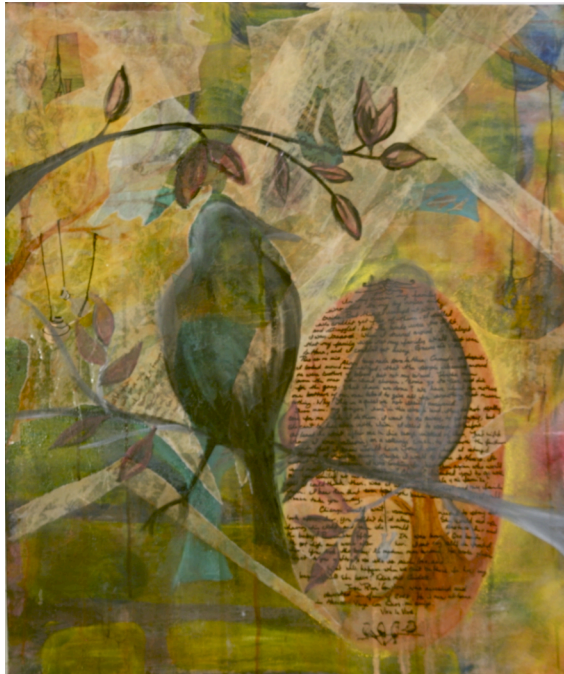
My recent interest in my well-explored process is in telling the stories of dreams. These paintings go through the same steps as those before, but instead of always telling a tale of hardship and sorrow, these may tell a story of light.

The dreams of which my paintings speak are still not those that have been directly influenced by my personal story. These paintings are more indirectly influenced by my interpretation of things, as all narratives ultimately are. However, as the initial "reader," of this story I have a very close first hand account of the dreams, which I pass on in my paintings.

Dreams have been considered by many over generations to tell us something about our subconscious or may be the subconscious' way of telling us what the conscious cannot piece together. Through cross-referencing apparent symbols in dreams with their common interpretations I have begun to tell stories that I consider to be authored by the subconscious of my human subjects. This reference of common symbols enables the full concept my process to come through, in a new way.

In dreams we only remember pieces of what our subconscious told to our pre-conscious while we were sleeping. The details of these dreams seem to be veiled in our memories with pieces from each part. My system of removal allows me to show dreams in the way we remember them, in pieces and segments shrouded in the mystery that is a dream. This series of paintings are the most recent in my research, but have developed as if a child of the two previously discussed bodies of work. These works combine elements from both the "Wall Series" and the "Gang Series." These paintings use the layering of images, the thinner application of materials, and the more literal symbolism from my work on gangs; they take their color and their "peer into the past" feeling from my work with walls. Layering images with oil paint and tissue paper, and then tearing away sections of each image while continuously

adding another layer atop the old, this is the way these paintings are made. I refer to this body of work mostly as the "Cameo Series" due to their most obvious identifying feature; a prominent oval that contains within it a separate part of each story. In some of the paintings the cameos contain an image, in others, the actual dictation of a story.



Section 4: The Vessel and Other Images

A major part of my paintings that I have yet to talk about is my personal image bank. In my work the most often recurring image is that of the vessel. Vessels have been a signature in my artwork since I was a child. Having come out of the Southwestern culture, clay was a standard material. All indigenous peoples, including my mother's family, had a strong tie to the art of earth working, usually taking the form of pottery. My grandmother used to tell me that people were as different as the vessels that lined the windowsills of her adobe house. Portraiture has

its place, but I found a safety in painting vessels as a substitute for portraits. Unless you tell them, no one can tell if they are the fat vessel, the cracked vessel, or the empty vessel. There is a privacy that I believe goes very much along with my previously stated ideas about art as more private form than journaling. Another easy image to spot in my work is that of the adobe house. As I mentioned earlier my early years spent in the American Southwest created the idea in my mind of home as being an adobe hut shadowed by the mountains. This has become a common motif in my drawings as well. These images, especially the vessel, are ALWAYS in my work. Sometimes I find it more important that a recognizable form is hidden. Other times I choose to allow it to peek out of the background, and occasionally I allow the form a place of prominence within the piece. These choices have much to do with the narrative I am telling, as well as with the aesthetic that I am seeking from the finished piece.



Section 5: Empty Frames

Everything means something. Nothing? Nothing means everything. The recent installation of my work into a cohesive show contains the addition of empty golden frames. These frames are meant to represent the untold, the part of the story that is left unsaid. The unsaid in my work has much to do with the fact that I am telling the stories of others and may never fully understand what it all means. In my paintings I have often said that the absence is just as important as the presence. This idea carries through to the framing of empty space. I glorify nothing in close proximity to a whole lot of something. The other idea that is carried out symbolically by the frames is the idea that the destination is subordinate to the journey. How my paintings get to the final stage is just as important and often more so than the final piece.



In conclusion: An Attempt to Tie Up Loose Ends

In conclusion, I have spent the last year working on a project that I think has implications that stretch far beyond the boundaries of a thesis show and a paper. Ideas of art as journaling, of painting as a way of encoding private thoughts or memories, of removal as a way to revisit the past, are just some of the thoughts that deserve an even deeper investigation. This work has invaded every part of my life from its beginning and I do not see that changing any time soon.